

9. 'The peculiar grammar of the word "I"'

Wittgenstein describes a certain picture of what we are in this way: we use the word 'I' to refer to 'something bodiless, which, however, has its seat in our body'¹. The description fits Descartes' view nicely; it is also, Wittgenstein suggests, a view that has a powerful pull on many people. Now Wittgenstein's aim in philosophy is not simply, or even primarily, to offer and defend his own positions on a range of matters; he wants to understand what it is that tempts us by the views that he takes to be confused, and, in so doing, to help to free us from the confusion. The remark in *The Blue Book* quoted above is part of such a diagnostic discussion of the self and the body.

Please now read the passage from *The Blue Book*. (While my discussion of this extract will focus primarily on its first and last paragraphs, the whole of what is reprinted is relevant to our topic; it also gives a good flavour of much that is distinctive in Wittgenstein's approach to philosophical questions.)

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Wittgenstein suggests that what he speaks of as 'the peculiar grammar of the word "I"' gives rise to philosophical confusion. We come to think of the real person - the entity, that is, that thinks, feels pain, gets angry and so on - as being something distinct from the bodily thing that others can see. The confusion, he suggests, is connected with a distinction between the use of the word 'I' 'as object' and its use 'as subject'. Let us focus for a moment on one of his examples from the first group: 'I have a bump on my forehead'. Wittgenstein makes two claims about the use of the word 'I' here: (i) it involves the recognition of a particular person, and (ii) the possibility of error has been provided for. I would like you to pause here, and, without returning to the text, try to make a note of an illustration of each of these points.

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To see the sense in which the use of the word 'I' in this case involves the recognition of a particular person we can note that in principle two steps are involved in making the judgement that I have a bump on my forehead. I have to notice a bump on a forehead, and I have to notice whose forehead it is: namely, mine. We can imagine certain, admittedly rather odd, contexts in which the two steps become clearly separated. For example, I am in a mirror-lined room with lots of people; I notice, in a mirror, that someone has a bump on his forehead, and then suddenly realise that it is *me*. This second step is Wittgenstein's 'recognition of a particular person'. Now the sense in which 'the possibility of error has been provided for' follows immediately from this. Indeed, corresponding to the two steps involved in making the judgement, there is room for two kinds of error here: (i) I can go wrong in thinking that there is a bump on any forehead,

¹ Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, p 69. These are a record of lectures that Wittgenstein delivered in Cambridge in the years 1933-35. They acquired this name because the record of each series of lectures circulated, in unpublished form, in, in the one case, blue folders, and, in the other, in brown folders.

and (ii) I can go wrong in thinking that the forehead is *mine* - in thinking that it is *me* that has a bump on his forehead. It is the second of these that concerns Wittgenstein in this discussion. An example would be this: though I do not immediately realise it, I am looking in the mirror at a man, of similar appearance to myself who is standing close to me. See also Wittgenstein's example of the broken arm.

Now consider Wittgenstein's other group of cases: that in which he speaks of 'the use of "I" as subject': for example, a case in which I say 'I see a horse' or 'I have toothache'.² Of these cases Wittgenstein suggests that 'there is no question of recognizing a person' and 'no error is possible'. I would like you to pause again, and to make a note of ways in which, in these respects, judgements of this group differ from those of the first group.

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I distinguished two forms of error that are possible in the case of judgements such as 'I have a bump on my forehead'. In some (though not other) of Wittgenstein's second group of cases an error of the first kind is possible: for example, I think I am seeing a horse but it is in fact a cow. Once I have identified what is seen, however, there is no room for a further question concerning *who* it is that is doing the seeing. There is no question of glancing at my body or feeling my eyes to make sure that it is *me* that is seeing the horse. Thus, suppose that somebody responded: 'I agree that *someone* is seeing a horse (or is in pain) but are you sure that it is *you*? How do you know that it is *you*?' This question would have no sense. There is no step of recognizing a particular person in these cases; and, with that, there is not room for error about *which* person is involved.

Wittgenstein suggests, in the final paragraph of the extract from *The Blue Book*, that the difference between these two kinds of case is, at least in part, responsible for confusions that we tend to fall into when we think about the self. How it does so is this. When I judge, for example, that I have a bump on my forehead my judgement involves me in noticing certain publicly observable bodily features. I must notice that the forehead with the bump on it is part of this body: my body. In cases of the second kind this is absent. Thus, if (as in the crowded room example) I glanced at my body in the mirror 'To make sure', as I put it, 'that it is *me* that is in pain', this would reveal a bizarre confusion on my part. As we might express this: it would show that I did not understand the use of the word 'I' or 'me' in this kind of context. Now – and this is where the *philosophical* confusion comes in – that difference between the two kinds of case leads us, in our more abstract and reflective moments, to think that the word 'I' refers to different things in the two cases. We think that in the first kind of case it refers to the body. In the second kind of case, by contrast, it seems clear that the word cannot be referring to this bodily entity; for, as we have noted, my use of the word 'I' in this case does not depend on my identifying particular bodily features. This, Wittgenstein suggests, tempts us to conclude that I must be referring to some non-bodily entity that 'has its seat in the body'. And then we suppose that this, rather than the bodily being, is the *real* person: this is the real

² Wittgenstein was so absorbed by this example at a certain stage of his philosophical development that his classes at Cambridge were widely known as 'the toothache club'.

person because it is this, it seems, that is the subject of such essentially personal states as seeing, hearing, thinking and pain.

That, Wittgenstein suggests, is the conclusion that we are tempted to draw when we think about this feature of our use of the word 'I'. He also, of course, believes that the step by which we get to it, and the conclusion itself, are confused. To see where he thinks the confusion lies we can start with the following formulation (my own) of the line of thought that leads to this conclusion:

When I judge that 'I am in pain' I cannot be wrong in thinking that it is *me* that is in pain; and, closely linked with that, my judgement that it is me is in no way dependent on my identification of a particular set of bodily features. We have to account for these familiar facts. They are best accounted for by the proposal that *I* am something distinct from, and contained within, the body. There is no question of 'checking up that I have picked out the right body', since what has the pain is not the bodily being but, rather, the non-material mind that is the real me. Thus, I can know directly, and in a way that no-one else can, that the person who has a sore foot today is the same person as the one who was rather depressed yesterday: namely, me. I can know this without doing any identifying of a particular body since what I need to identify is that the being that is in pain is a particular non-bodily entity to which I, and I alone, have immediate access.

One possible objection to that line of thought was presented by the great Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-76):

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception.³

Hume's complaint is that he simply cannot find this non-bodily entity, which, it is claimed, I identify in myself every time I judge that 'I am in pain', 'I see a horse', and so on. To which it might be replied that it happens rather quickly, and at something below the level of full consciousness.⁴

Here is another question that we might press. It is suggested that I know '*directly*' - by looking inwards, rather than outwards at my body - that it is me that is in pain; and that is why there is no possibility of my getting it wrong: no possibility of my thinking that it is me that is in pain when, in fact, it is somebody quite other who is. (As I might think that it is me that has a bump on my forehead when, in fact, it is somebody quite other who has.) But now we can ask: how would this explain what needs to be explained? Why should it be supposed that the identification of a particular *non-bodily* entity should be

³ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, part iv, section 6; p 302 in Macnabb edition.

⁴ One might add that attempting to settle matters by introspection has never proved to be a particularly fruitful approach to philosophical questions: there is some tendency for each philosopher to find, when he looks inwards, just what his theory tells him he should find.

immune from the possibility of mistake in a way in which the identification of *bodily* entities is not?

We are, perhaps, thinking in terms of the idea that my acquaintance with this entity is so immediate that it is extraordinarily unlikely that I should misidentify it. We might reason: 'It is extraordinarily unlikely that I should mistake for blue something that is unambiguously red and is right in front of me in good lighting conditions. Well, it is like that, but more so, in the case of identifying an *inner, non-bodily* thing.' You might pause to ask yourself what you think of that answer.

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My own view is that it is a fudge. I will not, however, pursue this. For I believe that Wittgenstein takes the discussion to a deeper level when he remarks: 'To ask "are you sure that it's *you* who have pains?" would be *nonsensical*' (p 67). To see the significance of this observation I want to develop an analogy between the word 'I' and the word 'here'. Before reading on I would like you to think about that analogy. In particular, I would like you to consider whether there might be a significant analogy between the way in which the word 'I' functions in the statement 'I have toothache' (or 'I see a horse') and the way in which the word 'here' functions in the statement 'I am here' (or 'The horse is here'); and I would like you to consider whether we might learn something from the case of 'here' that bears on the case that is our concern: that bears, that is, on the suggestion that the word 'I' stands for a non-bodily entity to which the individual in question, and only that individual, has immediate access.

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Suppose that a friend and I, who are completely lost on a pitch-black night, lose sight of each other. My friend shouts 'Where are you?', and I reply 'I'm here'. That reply is not dependent on my having identified my physical surroundings in any way; and, linked with that, it makes no sense to suppose that in saying 'I'm here' I might have got it wrong. It *makes no sense* to suppose this. The case is quite different from that in which, standing in front of an unambiguously Big Ben structure and with red double deckers all round me, I say 'I am in London'. It would be difficult to get that wrong! But it does *make sense* to suppose that someone should get it wrong. After all, they could have - for all I know they actually have - built a replica in Disney World; and the odd forgetful visitor might get confused for a few moments. Now it is not like that with the person who, on a dark night, says 'I'm here'. In this case, as I suggested, it makes no sense to suppose that the person might have got it wrong; it makes no sense to suppose that the true answer to the question was 'I am over there'.

The reason it makes no sense to suppose that one might have got it wrong is that one can correctly say 'I'm here' *even though one has no idea where one is*. The words 'I'm here' might, on the surface, look as though they are doing the same kind of work as do the words 'I'm in London': that is to say, identifying a particular physical location as being the one where I am. But it becomes clear that they do a very different kind of work when we reflect on the fact that if I had cried out 'Help!', or simply screamed, that would have achieved precisely the same as my words do. (Compare this with Wittgenstein's

discussion, on p 67 of *The Blue Book*, of the idea that ‘the word “I” in the mouth of a man refers to the man who says it’.)

The situation is the same when I say ‘I have toothache’. If it were like the Big Ben case it would at least make sense to suppose that I had mistaken someone else extremely like me for myself. When we acknowledge that that does *not* make sense we see that the matter must be approached differently. Certainly my use of the word ‘I’ does not rest on my identification of this particular bodily entity: this 5’10” tall, brown eyed handsome man. But the correction that has to be made to that suggestion is, in a sense, much more radical than is suggested by the Cartesian ‘non-bodily mind’ view. If, in saying ‘I have toothache’, I was identifying a particular non-bodily entity as the thing having the pain it would at least *make sense* to ask: ‘How do you know that it is *you* that is in pain?’. And it would at least *make sense* to suppose that I had *misidentified* the entity; for it would make sense to suppose that another very like it had taken its place. But neither the question nor the supposition makes sense.

I would like you now to consider the question: when I say ‘I am here’ what does the word ‘here’ refer to? How would you answer that question?

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One possible answer would be: it doesn’t *refer to* anything. Wittgenstein suggests that many of our confusions in philosophy arise from a deep-rooted assumption that every meaningful word *refers* to something. In the extract from *The Blue Book* that you read he draws attention to the many different uses that words have; and it seems clear that not all of these involve *referring* to something. Think, for example, of the words ‘is’, ‘at’, ‘or’ and ‘quick’. Perhaps, then, the word ‘here’ is, in this respect, like one of those.

On the other hand, you might have felt that the word ‘here’ is rather different from those examples. Thus, you might have suggested that when someone says ‘I am here’ the word ‘here’ refers to the place at which he happens to be: for example, the spot 45 yards due north of the old sheep dip. Now if we do think of the matter in this way, we will have to agree that the word ‘here’ refers to a different place on different occasions of its use; and we will have to agree, too, that a person may be referring to a particular place – for example, the spot 45 yards due north of the old sheep dip – even though he does not realise that that is the place to which he is referring (for he may be completely lost and have no idea where he is.)

Did you give either of those answers? Both seem to me acceptable. I rather hope that you were *not* tempted to give an answer of the following form: when I say ‘I am here’, the word ‘here’ refers to a non-material location to which the individual herself has immediate and infallible access. While I am not sure what such an answer would mean, it does not, I hope you will agree, point in a very promising direction.

By analogy with the above, we might maintain that, when someone says ‘I have toothache’, the word ‘I’ does not refer to anything.⁵ Alternatively, we might say that the word ‘I’ refers to the human being who is speaking: for example, to David Cockburn, the

⁵ Perhaps, I am not sure, Wittgenstein commits himself to this answer when he writes: ‘In “I have pain”, “I” is not a demonstrative pronoun’ (p 68).

man who is 5'10" tall, has brown eyes, teaches philosophy at Lampeter, and so on. As with the case of 'here', if we do express the matter like that, we will have to agree that the word 'I' refers to a different human being on different occasions of its use; and we will have to agree that a person may be referring to a particular human being - for example, to David Cockburn, the man who is 5'10" tall, has brown eyes, teaches philosophy at Lampeter, and so on - even though he does not realise that that is the person to which he is referring (for he may be in a state of dreadful delusion, supposing that he is Clint Eastwood, and 6'4" tall.)

Within philosophical discussion of the idea of the self, 'the prejudice against the body' takes a particularly powerful form in relation to questions concerning *the identity of the person over time*. In this section we have considered one of the roots of this 'prejudice'. In the next, we will stand back a bit, and consider in more general terms how we might best understand this idea of identity: the idea that someone before us now is the *same* person as one we have encountered in the past.